Title
No Center, No Centrists

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7b91n8c8

Author
Lakoff, George

Publication Date
2007-08-14

Peer reviewed
"Centrism" is the creation of an inaccurate self-serving metaphor, and it is time to bury it.

There is no left to right linear spectrum in the American political life. There are two systems of values and modes of thought -- call them progressive and conservative (or nurturant and strict, as I have). There are total progressives, who use a progressive mode of thought on all issues. And total conservatives. And there are lots of folks who are what I've called "bicontempluals": progressive on certain issue areas and conservative on others. But they don't form a linear scale. They are all over the place: progressive on domestic policy, conservative on foreign policy; conservative on economic policy, progressive on foreign policy and social issues; conservative on religion, but progressive on social issues and foreign policy; and on and on. No linear scale. No single set of values defining a "center." Indeed many of such folks are not moderate in their views; they can be quite passionate about both their progressive and conservative views.

Barack Obama has it right: Get rid of the very idea of the right and the left and the center. American ideas are fundamentally progressive ideas -- the ideas this country was founded on and that carry forth that spirit. Progressives care about people and the earth, and act with responsibility and strength on that care.

The progressive view of government is simple. Progressive government has two aspects: protection and empowerment. Protection is far more than the military, police, and fire departments. It includes consumer protection, worker protection, environmental protection, public health, food and drug safety; social security, and other safety nets. It also includes protection from the government itself, and hence a balance of powers, openness, fundamental rights, and so on.

Empowerment include roads and bridges; public education; government-developed communications like the internet and satellite communications systems; the banking system; the SEC and institutions that make a stock market possible, and the court system, mostly about contracts and corporate law. Progressive government makes business possible. No one makes any money in this country without the progressive empowerment by government. A progressive foreign policy is not based solely, or
even mainly, on the state -- about the "national interest" defined as our military
strength and GDP. Progressive foreign policy focuses on individual people's interests
as well as national interests: on poverty, disease, refugees, education, women's and
children's issues, public health, and so on.

These are simply American values. The progressive movement is a patriotic
American movement. People who call themselves "centrists" share progressive views
on important issue areas, but have conservative views on other major issue areas.
The areas vary from person to person. There is no single moral perspective, no single
set of agreed upon issues.

The very idea that there is a "center" marginalizes progressives, and sees them as
extremists, when they simply share fundamental American values. The term "center"
suggests there is a "mainstream" where most people are and that there is a single set
of views held by that mainstream. That is false.

The fallacy matters in terms of Democratic electoral strategy. The Democratic base
consists of people who are mostly or totally progressive, just as the Republican base
consists of people who are mostly or totally conservative. How does the Democratic
Party as a whole, and how do Democratic candidates in particular, speak to those
who are biconceptual?

I am a cognitive scientist and believe that people's brains play a significant role in
elections. From the perspective of brain science, the answer is a no-brainer. (Sorry, I
couldn't resist!) You speak to biconceptuals the same way you speak to your base:
you discuss progressive values, and if you are talking to folks with both progressive
and conservative values, you mainly talk about the issues where they share
progressive values. What that does is evoke and strengthen the progressive values
already there in the minds of biconceptuals.

And of course, you don't negate or argue against the other on their framing turf --
remember Don't Think of an Elephant!

That was the winning strategy of Sherrod Brown in Ohio. Brown is a thoroughgoing
progressive who never moved one inch to the right. He talked about the issues where
he agreed with his Ohio audiences -- and legitimately spoke for them.

Think about Barack Obama going to Rick Warren's megachurch and getting a
standing ovation from evangelicals because he talked about the places where he
agreed with them, he activated his values in them (values they already had), he came
across as a man of principle, and he didn't get in their face about where he disagreed.
The losing strategy is to move to the right, to assume with Republicans that American values are mainly conservative and that the Democratic party has to move away from its base and adopt conservative values. When you do that, you help activate conservative values in people's brains (thus helping the other side), you offend your base (thus hurting yourself), and you give the impression that you are expressing no consistent set of values, which is true! Why should the American people trust somebody who does not have clear values, and who may be trying to deceive them about the values he and his party's base hold?

Harold Ford is a perfect example. He just wasn't believable as a good ole boy Tennessean when he took conservative positions. He just didn't seem real. The "not a real Tennessean" ad pointed up the discomfort that Ford's overt appeal to the right aroused in Tennessee. It was perceived as sleazy, and the "Call me, Harold" ad pointed to it as well. The ads were racist in part, but they were more than just racist. It would be hard to imagine such ads directed at Barack Obama.

Which brings me to the DLC, which Harold Ford now heads.

My colleague, Glenn W. Smith, has pointed to the DLC strategy of getting as many "swing voters" as possible and the minimum number of base voters needed to win. That is why the DLC and Rahm Emanuel argued against Howard Dean's 50-state strategy and for a swing-state alone strategy.

The DLC has concentrated on policy wonkishness (see their 100 new policy ideas on their website) rather than values. Their concentration on laundry lists of policies rather than vision, values, and passion has not helped the Democrats electorally.

The reason the DLC has been attacking progressives, Smith argues, is that DLC members have major conservative values and are threatened by the progressive base. Some of those values are financial: Wall Street, the HMOs and drug companies, agribusiness, developers, the oil companies, and international corporations that benefit from trade agreements, outsourcing, cheap labor abroad, and practices that harm indigenous populations but bring profits. A powerful motivation for the party has been that, if they take such positions, they, like the Republicans, can get big money contributions from Wall Street.

But there is more involved here than money. The DLC seems also to share the foreign policy idea that we should be maximizing our "national interest" -- our military strength, economic wealth (measured by GDP), and global political clout (presumably coming from economic and military clout). This is opposed to a foreign policy that maximizes the well-being of people, both at home and abroad.
But worst of all, the DLC has been cowed by the conservatives. They have drunk the conservative Kool-Aid. As Harold Ford intimated in his debate with Markos Moulitsas: To win you have be a hawk on foreign policy, a social conservative on abortion and gay marriage, and not raise taxes. Nonsense.

Even worse, Ford is suggesting that those in the party who don't hold those views say that they do. There's a name for someone who goes against his principles to pander for votes. It's not a nice name.

In all the commentary about that debate, an important aspect has gone without comment. Markos certainly bested Ford. But to do so, he also had to best the moderator, David Gregory, who insisted on using the conservative-tainted word "liberal." Over and over, Markos resisted Gregory's frames. Gregory was not using Markos' frames and Markos insisted on his own.

It is important to stand up to the DLC, and to the idea that there is a unitary mainstream center, that they are it, and that progressives are extremists and deserve to be marginalized.